

How Bipolar Disorder Differs from Depression and Anxiety

“Hi, I’m Tristan Miller, and this is Positive and Negative, a podcast about mental health and the arts.”

Podcaster and actor Tristan Miller saw his dad suffer from Bipolar Disorder, but when he suggested to his doctor that it might explain his own severe highs and lows, his doctor instead prescribed medicines for anxiety and depression.

“And so, I pushed through it, through the whole month, but that month I was more irritable and just mean and closer to killing myself than I ever have been.”

What Tristan experienced trying to get help for his severe mood swings is not unusual. Two to 3 percent of Americans, like Tristan, have Bipolar Disorder. Also, like Tristan, many are not given the right diagnosis at first. Instead, they are told they have anxiety or depression. Sometimes the symptoms change over time and what started out as depression alone later includes symptoms of Mania. This is even more complicated because many people with bipolar disorder also have some form of anxiety. And anxiety can sometimes look like mania, which is part of bipolar disorder.

“The problem is, it’s not just anxiety. It’s not just fearfulness, unreasoning fearfulness. It’s also a thinking disorder.”

As for depression, that, too, is different in someone who has bipolar disorder. It may look like major clinical depression, but the most common medications used to treat depression, called Antidepressants, can actually make bipolar symptoms worse.

“You give them an antidepressant, they might not respond at all in terms of the depression. They might flip over into a mania.”

In fact, not getting better with antidepressants is often one clue to diagnosing bipolar disorder. Another clue is signs of manic episodes, the high or irritable side of mood swings.

“They’re not complaining about being hypomanic. That’s actually kind of energizing; people get a lot of work done. They feel very creative and they don’t want to get rid of those particular sets of circumstances. But being depressed is so painful. That’s what gets them to treatment.”

If you are worried that you don’t have the right diagnosis, there are steps you can take to help your mental health professional identify bipolar disorder. First, keep track of your symptoms, how severe they are and how long they last. Make sure to write your symptoms down in a journal you can give to your mental health professional. Family members can help with this.

“My primary illness is chronic bipolar disorder.”

Mary Neubauer is a mental health advocate who also has bipolar disorder. She says it may take time to find the correct medications, in the right amounts that work for you. That’s why it’s important to keep appointments with your health care team and let them know if anything changes in how you’re feeling.

“Some medications you have to have blood levels done and it’s really important to go and have those blood levels done when your doctor or your prescriber says you need to have a blood level done to

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make sure that that blood level is accurate in your body, so you know the medication is doing what it needs to do.”

Psychotherapy also can be a part of managing bipolar disorder. Individual Talk Therapy and Family therapy can help reduce tensions that could trigger manic or depressive episodes. Hobbies and other, healthy ways to deal with stress and emotions can help, too. For Christopher Woynar, another bipolar survivor and a registered nurse, that means avoiding alcohol and generally trying to live healthier.

“I’m very much at higher risk for feeling feelings of hopelessness or being depressed or isolating myself. So, with knowing that I continue to live a life where I exercise I try to eat as best as I can. Even though I do like, you know, my sweets. Making sure to have a good support system. Also, to have a hobby it’s something that you can release emotions healthily you in a healthy way.”

Exercising regularly and getting enough sleep also reduce stress, anxiety and depression triggers that can cause a bipolar episode. Other relaxation and stress-reduction techniques can help, too. Meditation is a staple for Mary Neubauer.

“It centers me for my day. It gets me ready to think about what my day is going to be about and where I’m headed. And then I can take a look at what my calendar is and focus on what may take more energy than one other piece of my day and what might be more stressful.”

There are many ways to manage bipolar disorder and live a successful life, but first you must have the right diagnosis. Work with your mental health professional, and be honest about your highs as well as your lows, so the best treatment plan can be developed for you.